

## Vicar's Report for the APCM at St Stephen's Ealing on 17 May 2026

Twenty years ago, I went on a tour around Germany with my youth orchestra. It was the last tour I went on before I headed off to university. Unfortunately for a tuba player, I managed to get a chest infection on the outward journey, and that meant I couldn't play in any of the concerts. It was heartbreaking. But the thing I remember most of all about that tour is hearing my friends play the best they had ever played. I trust it had nothing to do with my absence, but who knows! Either way, there was a palpable sense of everything clicking into place, every nuance of the music just right, and each of my friends shining in their individual performances. For all the disappointment I felt, I was beaming with pride. I didn't play a single note that whole tour, but I felt in many ways like I was performing with them. As I stepped out of that orchestra and headed to university, I was held by the friends I loved. And in that sense I still got to play.

The pastor and theologian John Wimber used to say that in the church 'everyone gets to play.' Whatever your gifts or skills or resources or stage of life, everyone gets to play. No one is sidelined, and no one misses out because of injury or illness. After all, when we come together, we aren't *doing church*. We *are* church. We are each a blessing to one another. We each reveal something of Jesus Christ to one another. And together, we reveal something of the love of Jesus Christ to our wider community. We really are stronger together. 'Everyone gets to play.'

Many of us have invested in the life of St Stephen's over many years. And you know what it feels like when you get to play, using your gifts, skills and resources to be a blessing to one another and the wider community. St Stephen's is what it is today because of all that you have given of yourselves in faith to make the love of Jesus known in our community. And as I look back to the parish profile – that snapshot into your life together that was so instrumental in bringing me here as the vicar – there's recognition that this faith needs to be passed on. 'Our four most important dreams for the coming five years,' it said, 'are to:

- Inspire more younger people to follow a faith journey
- Bring the love of Jesus to more people in the community and beyond
- Motivate more volunteers, especially from younger members of the church, and
- Strengthen our stewardship of the environment by achieving a Gold Award from Eco Church.'

Four dreams that are about faith being passed on, two of which very clearly highlight the younger generations. We've seen fruitfulness in these two areas over the last year. One of the highlights for me was our Harvest celebration. At our 10.30 service we actively encouraged everyone under the age of 18 to participate in the service if they

wanted to. Some sang, some wrote prayers, others served on the tech. And that week we had 42 under-18s in church, most of them serving in some way. Afterwards the Daytimers Connect Group, inspired by what they had been learning together, hosted a wonderful lunch for the whole church as an outworking of God's generosity and hospitality towards all his children. That day, I suggest, was a taste of what it can look like when everyone gets to play.

There are exciting things to come as well. I recently mentioned the idea of a Confirmation service, and I have already had a handful of younger people, both children and young adults, express interest in taking that step of faith and becoming more involved in the life of their local church here at St Stephen's. Given the opportunity, younger generations are stepping up. We've seen it tonight as well, as someone under the age of 18 was elected to the PCC and someone in their twenties was appointed to the churchwarden team. These are all signs that the dreams presented in the parish profile are coming to fruition in some way.

Everyone gets to play. And as we inspire younger people to follow a faith journey or get involved in serving within the church family, we don't just sit and wait for it to happen. We encourage, we support. We recognise that we all have something to pass on, no matter what stage of life we're in. And we pass these things on in a spirit of openness. We don't pass the baton on and turn away. And we don't say 'you must only ever do it this way'. Instead we watch, we cheer, and we urge one another on until the race is over, sharing in the whole journey.

Everyone gets to play as faith is passed on from one generation to the next. And because everyone gets to play, everyone gets to be built up in faith too.

Where does all of this land as we look ahead to the coming year? Let me offer three headings:

- Teams
- Openness, and
- New possibilities

First, **teams**.

When we come together as a church, we aren't a collection of random individuals. We are a body, knit together in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit who sheds abroad the love of our heavenly Father into each of our hearts. We don't exist in isolation, even when we're apart. We're a team. We journey forward together.

We're a team of individuals who each have different things that we're good at, things that can be used both to bless God and one another. As it happens, some of us are

good at the same things, and so we become a team of teams: welcome team, prayer ministry team, serving team. I could go on. Working in teams we support one another and we learn from one another as we go about the tasks committed to our charge. It's in the ways that we work together that we show our love for God and one another.

As I reflect on our life together, I see many people serving in all kinds of different ways and that is a true delight. And I want to thank you all for that. Thank you for all that you give of yourselves in so many ways to bless the wider church family. When I talk about working in teams, this isn't to diminish the excellent teamwork that already happens in various parts of our life together. But I do believe that there is room for bringing a bit of definition and clarity to our teams, just as the PCC has considered the churchwarden role afresh and brought definition to that role and how they work together.

Bringing clarity to our teams, I believe, will make it easier to invite people into serving, because each team will have a clear remit, and inbuilt support from fellow team members. A team mindset also points towards a shared commitment to growing our gifts and skills *together*, which in turn cultivates confidence in what we do particularly by those who may be newer to the church. And we must always be attentive to those who are newer, because whereas we know that we get to play, often those who are newer don't unless they are specifically invited. Which brings me to the second area.

### **Openness.**

Teams by nature work towards common ways of doing things. Those ways are St Stephen's shaped, but they're not set in stone. As we commit ourselves to learning from one another in teams, we also commit ourselves to seeing things from different perspectives, sharpening ourselves with fresh insights. People who are newer to the church can be a great gift to us because they notice things that we so often miss through force of habit. As we pass the faith from one generation to the next, openness to learning from one another is key.

I perceive many ways in which God is inviting us into openness at this time. We've seen it tonight in the appointment of a churchwarden team, having failed to appoint churchwardens this time last year. We have seen it in the appointment of a team of parish safeguarding officers introduced in person this morning. And we will soon be welcoming Alison Ingram as our new curate, someone in whom I specifically will be committed to passing on the faith I have received. After a rather lean year where some of our named roles are concerned, I'm certainly looking forward to this increased capacity!

This sense of God inviting us into openness is reflected too in the various works that will be completed on our building over the Summer, not least the car park. Where things

have seemed a little bit stuck, and where plans have been frustrated for whatever reason, now we're beginning to stretch back out into openness. And that's exciting because finally with openness comes **new possibilities**.

The story's told of a young boy who was helping his mum prepare a roast dinner. He was intrigued when his mum cut the legs off the chicken and put them in a separate dish before roasting. 'Why did you do that?' he asked. 'It's just what you do,' his mum replied. 'I learnt it from my mum, your nan. Go and ask her why; she's in the lounge.' He went to find his nan. 'Nan, why do you cut the legs off a chicken before you roast it?' She responded with a laugh. 'Oh, it's silly really. It's just because my roasting tin isn't very big so I cut the legs off to make the chicken fit. That's all.'

We're part of one holy catholic and apostolic church. But the church has never been unchanging. The church in every generation adapts and responds to the world around it as it makes the love of Christ known in its day. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus is famed with saying, 'you never step in the same river twice.' As the world around us changes, there are always new possibilities for sharing the love of God in Jesus Christ.

One new possibility that has been raised recently is the nursery agreed in principle by the PCC. We're not going to drill down deeply into that this evening, but let me say that a project team is going to be set up to navigate the various decisions that need to be made as we work towards that possibility. It's the next important stage of discerning whether God is indeed in this possibility, working through all the questions about the practicalities in an ordered and systematic way.

But as I said at the meetings about the nursery a couple of weeks ago, pursuing this one new possibility doesn't mean that there aren't other possibilities. We're not going to throw all our eggs into one basket and stop considering how God might be leading us to make the love of God known in other ways. By cultivating a team mindset and choosing a posture of openness, I have every confidence that new possibilities will soon emerge. But as I said this morning, this all begins with prayer.

Prayer is at the very heart of what we exist to do as the Church.

It's often said that prayer changes things. It doesn't. *God* changes things. And we believe in a God who not only hears our prayers but also responds. We can be assured that God *does* hear, and that God *does* respond to the prayers of his people. It is *this* God – the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ – that we seek to become more like, and help others to know.

We have a pattern of praying together at St Stephen's. Monday and Friday mornings in the meeting room. Tuesday and Thursday mornings online. And the first Tuesday evening of every month in the meeting room. But as I reflect on who engages with these

occasions, I find myself wondering whether we've got the pattern right for the church we are today. We're never going to find a pattern of prayer that works for everyone all the time. But as I come into land, let me ask a question: what would help you cultivate the sense that we are praying *together* as the whole people of God here? Just as everyone gets to play, how do we ensure that everyone gets to pray, corporately, together in our St Stephen's limb of the body of Christ?

I love being Vicar of St Stephen's. I remain deeply grateful to God for bringing me here to lead. I am excited by what I see him doing in your lives and in our life together as a church. And I have a great sense of anticipation for what he might be wanting to do among us. In the coming year to 2027, we look ahead to celebrating 40 years of making this building our home and marking this jubilee together. Right now, my prayer is for more prayer together as a church; for growing our teams which pass on the faith; for openness to the Spirit; and for faith to explore all the new possibilities God will put before us. It is a privilege to be leading St Stephen's in this season. Please do pray for me as I pray for you all. And may God be evermore glorified in this place, in our church, and in our lives.